

40 Book on Libby crisis offers

By KATHLEEN McLAUGHLIN
for the Missoulian

In the fall of 1999, the incredulous eyes of Montana and the nation turned to Libby when the Seattle Post-Intelligencer revealed that decades of corporate profiteering and government indifference had killed and sickened hundreds of people exposed to asbestos from the town's vermiculite mine.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency rushed in, along with state and national media and politicians intent on cleaning up the mess and preventing future deaths. Now, more than four years later, most reporters are gone, the EPA's cleanup budget for Libby has been slashed and the town's plight has once again been pushed to the backburner.

Enter "An Air that Kills," the newly published book by Andrew Schneider, the Seattle journalist who initially uncovered the Libby scandal, and David McCumber, managing editor at the PI who worked with Schneider on the Libby investigations.

The book again brings to the forefront the astounding events surrounding Libby and asbestos contamination and deaths

across the country. The writers outline in meticulous detail the history of vermiculite and tremolite asbestos and how the vermiculite came to commercial use via one Libby entrepreneur in the early part of the last century.

They follow the progression of the mine, strange illnesses and deaths and among mine workers and their families and the decades of unresponsiveness by state and national government officials and mining companies that ran the operation.

The book invokes the same reaction time and again: Disbelief.

Disbelief that public health officials did nothing even as they knew decades ago that Libby asbestos was killing people.

Disbelief that W.R. Grace and Co., and its predecessor, Zonolite, apparently placed so little value on the lives of vermiculite mine workers and their families.

Disbelief that Montana and the rest of the country somehow missed the fact that alarming rates of people were sick and dying of asbestos poisoning in the state's remote northwestern corner.

Review

"An Air That Kills," by Andrew Schneider and David McCumber (G.P. Putnam Sons)

meticulous detail

Disbelief that asbestos is still not banned from use in consumer products in America.

Now comes perhaps the greatest disbelief – that the issue is once being pushed aside. As Schneider and McCumber lay out their years of research, following Libby's deadly ore around the country and even the world, they continually note the reluctance of U.S. government officials at the very top to address the deadliness of asbestos once and for all.

The scope of the book goes far beyond Libby and Montana and presents damning documentation of the nation's highest leaders protecting the litigation-besieged asbestos industry. Following asbestos poisoning around the country led the journalists all the way to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack in New York, which left clouds of toxic dust around the city – likely linked to another W.R. Grace and Co. product. EPA brass, the book notes, still downplays the health hazards of the dust.

There are some hints in the book that former EPA Administrator Christine

Whitman, who quit last year, may have seen her bosses' inaction at Libby and asbestos as a last straw.

Schneider and McCumber also bring out new findings in Libby that have not been reported, such as the discovery of a vermiculite dump near the Kootenai River last summer that the EPA did not know about before.

In the end, the book always returns to the folks of northwestern Montana who first exposed the asbestos poisonings.

Unlike "A Civil Action" or books in a similar vein, the lawyers and journalists are not the heroes of this story. Schneider makes it clear that the facts of Libby would have stayed hidden much longer if not for residents and asbestosis victims Gayla Benefield and Les Skramstad, both of whom sued W.R. Grace and continue to fight for their families and other ill Libby residents.

Benefield has seen more than 60 family members sickened by the dust and was the first to open up to Schneider about what was going on in Libby. Skramstad worked for the mining operation for just two years,

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but it was enough to sicken his entire family. The book aptly captures their deep-seeded anger but optimistic that they may make the community safer for generations to follow.

The book's other stars are the employees of the Environmental Protection Agency's mainly Denver-based team that worked in Libby, led by Paul Peronard, along with EPA toxicologist Chris Weis and U.S. Public Health Service's Dr. Aubrey Miller. Exposing internal memos, e-mails and detailed interviews, Schneider and McCumber outline over and over again how Peronard the others on the EPA team repeatedly angered their bosses, challenged long-standing government science practices and put their jobs on the line to help push to make Libby safe again.

In one particularly poignant moment, the writers describe a memorial for asbestos victims at the Libby cemetery in 2002. In

stark contrast to the overwhelming national attention in Libby after the initial news in 1999, not a single reporter or major elected official is present to watch as the locals read the names of hundreds of Libby residents killed by the toxic dust.

"I guess they all think the problems are solved, the danger is passed and all the vermiculite as been removed," Skramstad

tells Schneider.

This book is essential reading for anyone who might think that's true, and for anyone who thinks that such things can't happen in this day and age.

Kathleen McLaughlin is a former reporter for the Lee Newspapers of Montana who now works as a journalist in Shanghai, China.